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**Nigerian widows on screen: Reflections
on a changing landscape**

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Abstract

The welfare of African widows has generated a significant amount of research within the past twenty years, mainly from Nigerian scholars having an insider's knowledge of these practices, with female scholars often taking the lead. Recent years have seen scholars' concerns spill over to the public arena, with a growing number of voices challenging long-established traditions associated with widowhood. This article briefly surveys the development of studies on this issue, focusing on Igboland, a linguistic and cultural area in south eastern Nigeria. It shows how these concerns have found their way into Nollywood films, considers the evolution of storylines and explores their links with societal trends, analyzing sixteen films produced between 1998 and 2013.

Key words: Nigeria – Igboland – Widowhood –Nollywood

**Nigerian widows on screen – reflections on a changing
landscape**

From the beginning, Nigerian video films, commonly known as 'Nollywood,' have focused upon family life, discussing topics such as polygamy, infidelity, childlessness and couples' relationships with in-laws. As filmmakers grew bolder in their

representation of societal issues, recent years have seen some of them joining the growing number of voices challenging long-established traditions concerning the treatment of widows. This article, focusing on Igboland¹, one of the areas of Nigeria most affected by these practices, briefly surveys traditional practices associated with widowhood, compares them with their representation in video films, and considers the evolution of filmmakers' attitude on this issue.

The weight of tradition

Explaining the Igbo concept of extended family, central to the culture and linked to that of land tenure, Uchendu (1995) reaffirms the local variations which characterise Igbo cultural landscape and distinguishes two different approaches to the extended family system, ruled by two separate concepts, those of *Umunna* and *Ikwu*.² The one of particular relevance to this study is the first, still practised in a large area,

The *Umunna* kinship belt, coincid[ing] with the strictly patrilineal areas of Igboland, which is the whole Igbo territory less the eastern portion of the mid Cross River basin. Marriage rules provide for the payment of comparatively large bridewealth in the *Umunna* belt resulting in the acquisition of full genetrical and uxorial rights in their wives [sic] and the incorporation of such rights in their descent lines, no matter who fathered the children. The logic of bridewealth payment is that 'the child belongs to the man who paid the bridewealth'. Widow inheritance is practiced because the patrilineage and not just the bridegroom, has an enduring interest in every marriage (p.358).

¹ Widows account for "nearly 50% of the adult female population in Africa" (Akujobi, 2011, p. 4). Igboland, a linguistic and cultural area in South Eastern Nigeria, covering the five States of Enugu, Anambra, Abia, Ebonyi, and Imo in South eastern Nigeria, and spilling into the neighbouring States of Rivers, Cross River, Edo and Bayelsa, has been identified as an area most affected by practices studied here. A few studies have equally been done on Yorubaland (Oloruntimehin 1991) or comparing the Igbo and Yoruba rituals (Fasoranti & Aruna, 2007).

² The *Umunna* is the extended family of the father's lineage. The *Ikwunne* is the maternal patrilineage. For more details about these two systems, see Uchendu, 1995.

This is confirmed both by my personal fieldwork and other studies (Ebighgbo, 2010; Onyekuru, 2011, p. 358). In the *Ikwu* belt on the other hand, an area less well documented, stretching from Okpoha-Amasiri-Edda (Ebonyi State) in the north to the Abriba-Ohaffia axis (Abia State) in the south and spilling into Ugep in Cross River State, “widow inheritance is either absent or unimportant, the child-bearing capacities of women are not transferred at marriage, because they belong to their descent group and while the socialization of the child is the formal responsibility of the patrilineage, this may also be shared” (Uchendu, 1995).

The so-called ‘widow inheritance’, one of the many Igbo Hebrew traditions (*Genesis* 38), which expects the deceased’s brother to take his wife and care for her, was meant to ensure women’s welfare. Anchored in a culture where individuals are seen first and foremost as members of a family, it assumed that “being remarried within the family fulfils [the widow’s] initial ambition of being married into the family, and ensures a respectable place for [their] children” (Ebighgbo, 2010, p. 301). In reality, these laudable aims have often been subverted, leaving widows and orphans destitute after losing all their assets to their in-laws’ greed. The plight of widows, a direct consequence of the above, had already been noted by Basden (1921, pp.116, 121; 1938, pp.270-279) and Leith-Ross (1939, pp.101-103) in Igboland during the colonial era, yet did not attract scholarly attention until well after Independence (see bibliography), resulting in a dearth of diachronic research on the issue (Akujobi, 2011 p.4). One of the first empirical studies on widowhood practices was carried out in the Okrika, Ahoada, Ogoni, Ikwerre and Nembe areas of south eastern

Nigeria – located in the current³ Rivers and Bayelsa States (Ngeri-Nwagha, 1990). Umoren (1995), who consulted this publication, later noted that “in Ogoniland [also], the widow's ordeal begins with the people's suspicion that the widow is responsible for the husband's death. She is adjudged guilty until her prolonged swearing by ancestral shrines and an oracle consulted by elders, exonerate her.”

The last fifty years saw a continuous exodus from rural areas to megapoles such as Lagos and Abuja, with an ever greater number of women passing through university and taking the role of high-powered executives. This period also witnessed the growing importance of national and regional women's lobbying groups. These changes finally triggered a new questioning of these age-long practices, found increasingly incompatible with the demands of urban professional lives and the mobility associated with globalisation.

From graves to screen

From the late 1990s onwards, Nigerian video films, often considered as a mirror of their society and whose focus on family issues was already well established, caught up with the on-going discussions on the issue of widows. Most of the storylines tell the widow's side of the story, in line with the established status of the industry as ‘edutainment’ (aiming to educate through entertainment) – here to raise awareness of the issue, with storylines often featuring the church as mediator, working alongside individuals to bring about an amicable solution while respecting traditional societal

³ Nigeria has experienced a gradual multiplication of the number of its States, from three in 1960 to 12 on May 27, 1967; 19 on March 17, 1976; 21 on September 23, 1987; 30 on August 27, 1991 and 36 on October 1, 1996, in addition to the Federal capital territory, with Abuja which replaced Lagos in 1991 as federal capital.

structures. Yet this cinematic treatment of the subject has seldom been considered by scholars, apart from a few paragraphs in studies on women in Nigerian video films (Anyanwu, 2003; Olujinmi, 2008). The present study seeks to add to Ernest-Samuel's (2009) study, the only one so far to address the issue.

In *Evil Men* (1998), the widow's story is used as a catalyst, revealing the corruption and greed of local elders. A gang of influential men terrorise a village after infiltrating the Igwe's cabinet⁴ and local church, and dispossess or destroy all those who oppose their plans to sell the land to nearby Onitsha⁵ businessmen. As the widow of a man they killed resists them, they kill her only son and persuade the Igwe to banish her from the village on murder charges. Their crimes eventually catch up with them: suspicious, the vicar of the local church excommunicates their leader; they then meet sudden deaths one by one and the widow is eventually restored to the community. Barrot (2008, p. 84) comments another film, *Yesterday* (1998), which screens a widow suffering "untold misery at the hands of her in-laws because they believe, without proof, that she killed her husband." *Divine Twins* (2007) focuses on the widow's extreme poverty. *Evil Forest* (2000) brings the widow's case closer to the central stage: one of them gets an early warning from her pastor to ward off evil plans concerning her and her only daughter. Feeling tired, she delays embarking on the fast suggested by her pastor: her daughter is later falsely accused of stealing at the Igwe's palace and the two are banned from the village. After the mother dies in the bush, the daughter is sheltered in an adjacent village: her

⁴ *Igwe* (from the Igbo word for 'sky') is one of the titles given to a traditional ruler in Igboland (Onwuejeogwu, 1981, p. 85).

⁵ Igboland's major market town, which boasts the biggest market in West Africa.

innocence will eventually be recognised and her good behaviour richly rewarded.

The treatment of widowhood in southern Nigeria and in Igboland in particular gradually found its way from the periphery to the heart of Nollywood, as revealed by some more recent productions, many of which, as *Widows* (2007), claim to be directly inspired by true life stories. In this film, the widow reminisces about her past – how she met her husband at the party organised to welcome him back home after his studies abroad. Her marriage to Chima, this “wonderful husband, friend and companion”, now a CEO in a pharmaceutical company, is blessed with three children. But soon a family dispute over money threatens the family’s peace as the husband, ignoring the wife’s plea, takes his brother to court. On the eve of the final hearing, Chima dies of heart attack, leaving his wife desolate. Back in the village, his death is considered as suspicious: the wife is met with hostility and ordered to submit to the “rites you must perform to prove your innocence.” She is locked with the corpse for three days, all the hairs of her body are shaved and her nails cut short. She is given the bathwater of the corpse to drink and insulted, bullied and beaten as she wails at daybreak. On the night that marks the end of her mourning, the *Umuada*⁶ tear down and burn her mourning clothes, burn her hair and send her naked to the stream in the heart of the forest for ablutions. The long dialogue between her and the *Umuada* give us a glimpse of both her ordeal and the state of mind of her tormentors:

- Is widowhood not enough pain and punishment for me?
- Nnenna, do you think we are called *Umuada* for nothing? [...] It is a pity, my child, that we have to dance to the music dictated to us by

⁶ The *Umuada* or *Umuokpu*, the group formed of married girls from the family, maintain close ties with their father’s family where they traditionally play a leading role during funerals. They have been identified as the main culprits in the maltreatment of their brothers’ widows during burials.

- our ancestors. Don't worry! Some day you will lead other women down the same path!
- Never! [...] (dialogue from the film)

Three months later, she is now faced with the demands from her elder brother-in-law, come to claim his right to inherit her, the children and the deceased's properties – refusing means losing both her home and her children. Her father himself has no consolation to offer: instead, he advises her to submit, as “this is tradition. [...] You can't change it, so you live with it. I advise you do not aggravate their anger.” The police themselves discourage her from rebelling, explaining that levirate marriage is lawful in Nigeria, “to take care of you and your kids.” Nnenna later manages to escape with the children. The elder brother-in-law keeps stalking her as she moves from one refuge to the next, supported by lady friends. In the end, she is provided with passports and visas and helped to the airport. The film concludes with a silent text: “I am caught in this cruel tradition, a tradition that metes out cruelty to widows. Why would society allow such? This is the price I am paying for being a woman. This is the sad and painful story of ‘the widow’.”

Another film, *Mortal Attraction* (2009), screens the same ordeal, later commented by the actress Chisom Oz-Lee in an interview: “my role in the movie was that of a mean sister in law [...]. In brief, the movie vividly captures the plight of widowhood and how your late husband's family members treat you. In the movie, the innocent widow was so much maltreated that God sent an angel in human form to save her. It's actually a true life story [...]”⁷ “The fact that *A mother's Fight* (2013), a film released even more recently and premiered

⁷ <http://www.nigeriafilms.com/news/6086/5/its-difficult-keeping-a-man-says-nigerian-born-us-.html>

by its lead actress and producer Uche Jombo-Rodrigue in her hometown in Abriba, Abia State on December 24, 2012, rehashes the same heart-wrenching story, inspired this time by the life of the producer's own mother, is yet another proof that this welfare issue needs urgent attention. *Saving Alero* (2001) had already plunged its audience in the dark world of innocent widows: after she sacrificed a lot to help him start his career, Alero's husband Nduka accidentally falls and dies during a heated argument at home. Blamed for his death, Alero, although declared innocent by the court, is kidnapped by the family and forced to go through the traditional ordeal. "In the final frames the heroin [...] is condemned to death by a village tribunal and thrown into a lake. The viewer concludes that she has drowned, which is confirmed by words in the closing credits on the martyring of widows in Africa. But [...] there is a final twist: Alero resurfaces, choking; she will be saved at the eleventh hour" (Barrot, 2008, p. 25).

Cross-cultural cases

Three other films attract the public's attention to the intercultural and international dimensions now reached by widowhood practices, amplified by the growing number of intercultural marriages in Nigeria, the significant importance of the Igbo dispersion outside Igboland and the Nigerian diaspora on the five continents. *The Mourning After* (2004), which combines a reflection on cultural differences between urban and rural settings with that of ethnic differences, is another very credible illustration of what 21st century widows still pass through. Bisi, a Yoruba cardiologist married to Chibuzo, an Igbo, lives in Lagos with her husband and two daughters. Her busy life is suddenly transformed when she gets pregnant with a son after twenty years of marriage, but

the husband suddenly dies of heart attack. “Overwhelmed with grief, Bisi agrees to go to her deceased husband’s village in the south east of Nigeria for the condolence ceremonies. She does not suspect the horrible web of circumstances in which the traditional belief system will ensnare her” (Barrot, 2008, p. 60).

Widow’s Tears (2010) tells the story of yet another happy family torn apart. The man is a wealthy executive; they have a son and his wife is pregnant with their second child. One night, their house is burgled and father and son are killed. The wife, Ezinne, goes to the village for the burial and goes through the traditional rituals, screened in great detail: all her body’s hair is shaved by the *Umuada* and she is told she will have to pass through the entire village naked. The sudden arrival of her brother with policemen will save her from that ordeal: the leader of the *Umuada* is arrested, while Ezinne is freed and spends three months in the village. On her return to town, she discovers that her brother-in-law now lives in her house and has taken over all the deceased’s properties. He refuses to let her in, arguing that the only thing a widow can do in town is to turn into a prostitute, and she is forced to go back home to the village. Eleven years later, she lives with her daughter, Ebele, an intelligent girl afflicted with bouts of unexplained kleptomania which ruin her prospects of further studies, as she keeps stealing from relatives, shops and room-mates at the university. Ebele’s deviant behaviour even ruins her marriage prospects as her suitor is scared away. Ezinne takes her daughter to several spiritists, in vain. In part II, *End of Widow’s Tears*, a pentecostal pastor reveals that the mother is responsible for her daughter’s plight: Ezinne then remembers that when she was sent away to the village while pregnant, hunger pushed her to start stealing to make ends meet. Then one day, she stole a goat and sold it to an old widow. The

owner later found his goat in the widow's compound and accused her of the theft. The old innocent widow was sent out of the village and was later found dead in the forest. Unknown to all, she cursed the goat's thief before dying. The pastor now advises Ezinne to return to the village and confess her crime to the elders: as they blame her, her brother comes on the scene and accuses her brother-in-law, saying that he caused the problem in the first instance by ejecting Ezinne from her matrimonial home and making her both homeless and penniless while pregnant. In this film, the maltreatment of widows is not only denounced in itself but shown to be at the root of other societal problems – homelessness, poverty and underachievement – and fought as a crime, a message drummed by the police intervention and imprisonment of the leader.

Timeless Passion (2011) follows the Nigerian diaspora's stories and explores the additional difficulties experienced by today's widows whose husbands die abroad. Mildred returns to Nigeria to bury her husband and follows the traditions but her husband's family holds her back. After nine months, she needs to return back to her life and work in London and her children need to resume their studies, but her husband's family refuses to let her travel and hides all the family members' passports, calling her a witch and asking her to confess to killing her husband. In the same vein, Elliott's film, *In the Cupboard*, premiered in Texas in 2011 and released in Nigeria in the summer of 2012, observes the Nigerian way of life from a new angle, revealing how traumatic the death of a family head can be in Igbo or Yoruba culture, especially when the generation gap between parents and children is complicated by cultural variations due to the children's relocation abroad in

parts of the world far removed from the family's culture.⁸ It tells of a man's grown-up children who come back home from all over the world after their father's unexpected death to gather around their mother and hear the reading of their father's will.

Female empowerment

Korie (1996) observed that “for the Igbo woman, the period of widowhood is not just a ritual phase but one that may be regarded as a permanent status of some independence” - a remark which seems to apply to the Yoruba as well, with Yoruba films providing some additional insight into the gradual change in women's attitudes, with “educated wives [...] refusing to conform to tradition. In most Yoruba films, widows in the modern setting refuse to marry the next of kin of their late husbands, as is the practice in Yoruba society [...]. Educational and economic empowerment have set these widows [...] free and they are able to lead their lives without men” (Olujinmi, 2008, p. 122). The same evolution can be found in some Igbo films: the central character of *Woman to Woman* (2011), Odibueze, a childless but rich and powerful woman, just lost her husband. The husband's brother, himself married, well established and father of a grown-up son, visits her and demands all business documents belonging to the deceased. The widow bluntly refuses to cooperate and orders him out of her house. Back home, his wife and son, fearing the widow's connections, strongly advise him against taking action against her, reminding him that she was the one who had brought most of the money into the marriage. The man keeps insisting that his late brother's properties rightly belong

⁸ Today, millions of Igbo are born and live outside their ancestral culture area, in Nigeria's megapoles and abroad, and end up knowing little of their parents' language or traditions.

to him by tradition, but when he tries to take them by force, the widow hires thugs to beat him, Later, conscious of her weak position as a childless woman, Odibueze calls Alice, a young lady she had earlier contacted with a view to pay her bridewealth and ‘marry’ her to her husband in order to ensure she gets children through her and strengthen her position as a wife.⁹ She now insists that her husband’s death has not changed the issue – only made it more urgent, and begs Alice to accept the deal, promising to bear all expenses related to the wedding. The lady eventually accepts and a man is found to stand in for the deceased. Unfortunately for the widow, the couple, once married, refuse to play the game: the man insists to keep the woman he now considers his lawful wedded wife and they soon throw the widow out of the apartment she rented for them. Odibueze, in spite of piling up convincing arguments and a good knowledge of Igbo traditions, will try in vain to convince family elders of her right to this posthumous marriage. Although the film is more interested in a reflection on alternative forms of traditional marriages, it is interesting to see how the storyline offers the widow a chance to tweak the rules of the traditional ‘woman to woman’ marriage meant to provide the husband with an offspring when the first wife cannot conceive. In the film, she now seeks to use this well-established tradition to protect herself from her in-laws’ threats: the words of the theme song and elders’ attitude both hint to a new attitude to tradition on the part of the film director, who clearly does not accommodate such a custom.

⁹ Cf. Bamgbose (2002, p. 6): “Another effect of childlessness in marriage under the Igbo culture is the recognition of ‘woman to woman marriage.’ This popular Igbo practice under customary law is where a sterile or childless married woman tries to fulfil her obligation of producing a child through her husband and therefore strengthening her position in the husband’s house. The practice is that the sterile woman pays the bride price for another woman whom she marries for her husband with a view of raising children for her through her husband.” Cf. Obi, 1998; Bingham, 1982; Robinson, 2001; & Ebighgbo, 2010. This tradition has its root in the Bible (*Genesis* 16 & 30), found to be the source of a number of Igbo traditions pre-dating colonisation.

A recent conference on “Nollywood in Africa, Africa in Nollywood” considered the representation of women in those films, and noted that

Nigerian films are now throwing up issues of liberation and empowerment for women. [...] Now, they call the shots, dictate what should and should not be done in offices and homes, ask their husbands to cook and perform other domestic chores and wield the same power that men do in almost all spheres of life including taking chieftaincy titles and spearheading community development. Patience Ozokwor is a Nollywood actress that a presenter, Aje-ori Agbese, used to substantiate her position in the debate. Her paper was titled, ‘Defining Women’s Liberation and Empowerment in Nigeria through Movies – A look at *Women’s Cot*, *Women in Power* and *The Bank Manager*’ (Agina, 2011).

Reacting to societal changes

Nigerian video films have mostly been taking sides with widows, depicting their suffering and their courage in adversity; yet three films present a different take, seemingly turning back the tide to resurrect the old stereotypes about criminally-minded widows. This move might be interpreted as the screening of societal fears triggered by the growing impact of education and urban life on traditional widowhood practices, with more and more widows being gainfully employed urban graduates well able to defend themselves. Added to that is the relentless in-road of statutory law into cases previously handled by customary courts, and the “overwhelming” impact of the 1999 federal Constitution in empowering local courts to enforce the rights of widows and female orphans (Nwogugu, 2010, p. 359). In *Evil Passion* (n.d.), “Jerry, a wealthy young man, is married to Linda. He gives a ride to a stranger, Ijeoma, one day on his way to work and she starts being attracted to him. Thereafter, Ijeoma’s desperation to get him to marry her takes her to a spiritualist whose

charms cause Jerry to abandon his wife and children and to marry Ijeoma. She [then] joins a club of women whose aim is to get their husband to make them partners in their businesses, murder the husbands after accomplishing this mission and inherit their wealth”(Akujobi, 2011, p. 29).¹⁰ *Women’s cot* (2005), considered as a fascinating case study in how Nollywood tends to mix up multiple, contradictory ideologies, opens on the maltreatment of a young widow, Joyce, whose husband died suddenly in a plane crash, a situation made worse by her being African-American and ignorant of her husband’s home culture as they had been living abroad. Having only two teenage daughters and no grown-up boy, she is in no position to claim her husband’s property according to custom, and faces harassment from her brothers-in-law. As the theme song of the film muses, “someone is crying: it’s a widow! Life has no mercy on a widow...” At that moment, she gets a surprise help from Ada, a mature, affluent widow who brings her into contact with a female lawyer and helps her win her court case against her in-laws. Later, on the advice of this new widow-friend, Joyce starts a widows’ association, the ‘women’s cot’, meant to shelter those women from maltreatment and get them support from the courts, with the motto: “Widows’ fraternity! The cause of the widows is the noblest cause of human endeavour.” The new association visits churches, gives money away, builds a good reputation and attracts a number of affluent new members. At that point, Joyce starts noticing Ada’s immoral behaviour, her keeping of young males, her encouraging young widows’ prostitution and her using seduction as a weapon. Yet she is unaware of Ada’s hidden agenda: while she is away on a business trip, Ada, following

¹⁰Cf. Ogunyemi’s assertion that “part of the coping strategy of the new Nigerian woman is to deliberately rid herself of the husband” (1996, p. 85).

orders from the marine Queen of the Coast¹¹, turns the association into a marine cult. It will take time and patience to break the hold of the marine Queen (Eze Nwaanyi) on the women and stop the unlawful killing of husbands by wives groomed into crime through lavish gifts of money. This film pitches Joyce against Ada: while illustrating the laudable efforts deployed by widows to be accepted as full members of the society instead of being regarded as their husband's appendage, and encouraging them to support each other, it suggests an ambivalent response from that same society, suspicious of new urban alliances ganging against tradition. Nigerian women themselves have often distanced themselves from the Western understanding of women's liberation and feminism: *Widows* screens these fears, revealing at the same time the power of female lobbies and cults and their involvement in Nigerian politics.¹²

After years of disempowerment during the colonial period and the "continued male colonial denials of female ritual importance and positions of power" (Jell-Bahlsen, 2008, p. 171), Igbo women gradually regained their position as independent, resourceful members of the community. We know that "in contemporary Nigerian society, the home video has taken over the informal evening fire-side school, thus it is not surprising that the camera lenses of some film makers have lent their voices to the campaign against such discriminatory, dehumanizing, denigrating and obnoxious cultural practice against women" (Ernest-Samuel, 2009, p. 185).

¹¹A marine deity, object of a powerful female cult on the banks of the Niger and Niger delta. Cf. Jell-Bahlsen, 2008.

¹² Cf. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1360615/The-role-of-Nigerian-women>. See also Ogunyemi-Okonjo 1991, Acholonu, 1995 and Aluko, 2012 for more details on the debate on the African version of feminism.

Tears and laughter

The treatment of widows in Nigeria has so far been presented as a physical and psychological welfare issue by Nollywood, with a majority of films classified as emotionally loaded dramas exhibiting the full list of maltreatments highlighted by academic publications, in a bid to enlighten the public and trigger a change in attitudes. In a strange twist, the same issue has inspired two very successful comedies clearly hoping to achieve the same aim through ridicule – presenting ordinary villagers and using a magnifying glass to show how unacceptable the male behaviour can be: *He-Goat/Oke Mkpì* (2002)¹³ screens an irresponsible sex-maniac and *Osuofia in London* (2003) a greedy, unintelligent and selfish polygamist. Osuofia learns that his elder brother, who had been living in the UK, is dead, and travels to claim his properties, including his English wife. The young and beautiful widow is not impressed: she has her eye on the inheritance too, and tries to rob him of his late brother's wealth. Believing he would be duped by her attitude, she agrees to follow him back to Igboland, marry him, befriend his other wives and try to get adjusted to life in the village. There is no hint here of any ritual: the film is built on the traditional stereotype of the greedy, scheming widow. *He-Goat/Oke Mkpì*, a comedy mixing English and Igbo languages, screens Uwakwe, a village womaniser who compares women with pepper soup, *isi ewu*, *ngwongwo* and *ugba*¹⁴, adding: “let me eat all of them and die!” He stalks one widow after the other, offering a shoulder to cry on and the friendship they crave – as he puts it, “you need a man that will put meaning into your life. Somebody like me.” Accused of “having no other job than impregnating widows

¹³ In Igbo culture, the he-goat is renowned for its uncontrolled sexual urge; this has led to the word being used as an insult.

¹⁴ Various types of local Igbo sauces. In Igbo slang, the word ‘eat’ is used to describe the sex act.

and making children without parents” and despised by married men, he boasts of having fathered most of the local children. Although this film is classified as comedy, it raises a number of sober issues such as the risk involved in unprotected sex and the threat of HIV/AIDS. Another issue broached here is that of genetic inheritance: with families traditionally wary of accepting men/women in marriage without screening them¹⁵ for inherited behavioural traits such as laziness, lying, stealing, womanising or poor intelligence, a loafing womaniser such as Uwakwe presents a serious threat to families whose widows get impregnated. One of Uwakwe’s children, a teenage boy who had been supporting his widowed mother, having learnt of who fathered him, commits suicide out of shame. The culprit is eventually met by the ghost of one of the widows he slept with and subsequently dies. One of the lessons of the film is for young widows to re-marry.

Elochukwu Amucheazi, a former boss of the National Orientation Agency, concedes that “most of the evils including treatment of women being portrayed in the video films mirror the societal happenings” (Anyanwu, 2003, p. 88). One thing is certain: the dramas and comedies considered here lift the veil and attract attention to real-life traditional behaviours and rituals in urgent need of change. Their message echoes that of Ibekwe (2007, p. 235), who applauds lobbying by women’s groups to change the situation discussed above, observing that

The empowerment of women’s sociocultural organisations can accelerate the abolition of all forms of violence. Women can play effective roles in eliminating gender-based violence and in initiating and implementing programmes that guarantee their reproductive and human rights. A women’s group in Anambra State, Southeast Nigeria, has successfully eliminated widowhood practices in the area. Women’s

¹⁵ A process known as *iju ase* (‘enquiry’) in Igbo which consists in a covert interview of people who know the family of the man/woman to be married, to ensure the probity and good reputation of that family.

groups should therefore be mobilised, strengthened and encouraged to champion issues that affect their well-being (Oyediran & Isiugo-Abanihe, 2005).

In conclusion

Scholars all agree on the need to educate the citizens on those harmful cultural practices, deemed incompatible with the modern way of life and beliefs. In January 2013, the Nollywood actress Omotola Jalade Ekeinde became instrumental in further bridging the gap between Nollywood films and the reality they expose when she decided to organise a daylong event tagged “The 20 Widows Makeover” which

Brought joy, empowerment and confidence building measures to widows. Twenty widows selected all over the country, were given serious make-overs and by the time the new look of the widows were revealed most were stunned by their transformation. From previously harried and downcast look, these women were transformed into vibrant, attractive and self-assured new women – a development most of the women say has changed their psychological framework for ever.¹⁶

Nollywood is certainly having an impact. As far back as October 2007, a forum posting from a young Igbo male on the Internet seemed to indicate a gradual change in traditions associated with burial rites and the treatment of widows:

I am Onye Igbo and I have witnessed several burial ceremonies, and none of them came remotely close to some of the macabre events being described here. During my father’s burial, we all wore white. My mum shaved her hair as a mark of respect. On the burial day, my father was well dressed up and lying in state. My mum sat in an adjoining room where people were going to her to express their condolences.

¹⁶ <http://www.thediasporanstaronline.com/nollywood-exclusives/277-why-omotola-is-fascinated-by-widowhood>

[...] My sister who was widowed at quite a young age went through nothing different.¹⁷

A 2003 film presents, tongue in cheek, a repentant family man and offers a hope for dispossessed and abused widows:

Buried Alive also hinges on social justice: the responsibility of the rich towards the poor and society's responsibility towards its vulnerable members. [...] The film tells the story of Anyumba, a rich man, who 'helps' his community by lending money at very high interest rates. [...] One day, one of his debtors gives him a poisoned kola nut, and he dies. In the mysterious world of the dead, he meets his dead father who commissions him back to earth because his time has not yet come. Meanwhile on earth, relatives and friends are busy making the funeral arrangements for the rich man. Influenced by the brother-in-law, they agree to buy the rich man the cheapest coffin on the market. They are ready to hustle him away into the coffin when the rich man resurrects. He is shocked to see the ignobility he has been treated with in death. This makes him become even more relentless with his debtors: his heart becomes stony and the cry of the widow cannot move him. He is summoned before the king to relent, especially toward the widows, but to no avail. One day, after confiscating a helpless widow's land and property he is blighted by blindness and vanishes from the earth. The ghost of the father appears to him to teach him a lesson in kindness and forgiveness. When he returns to earth, he is a transformed man. He begins to talk the language of love and forgiveness, he returns the land and property of the widows, he allows the debtors to pay at their convenience, and he forgives those who treated him meanly when he 'died' (Dipio 2007, p. 74-75).

It will be interesting to watch new films on the subject and see how they handle what definitely seems to be a changing scene.

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¹⁷ <http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com/forum/lounge/5636-widowhood-lord-have-mercy-4.html>

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